

Bountiful Barley: The Low GI Grain

By Elizabeth Keyser

Nutty in flavor, springy and slightly chewy in texture, barley is an ancient grain that's new again. Get a load of its nutritional content and glycemic index ranking (the lowest!), and you'll want to have some on hand at all times. Different barley preparations can have a delicious place at breakfast, lunch, dinner, and, surprise, even dessert (just swap out half of a recipe's regular flour for the same amount of barley flour).

Barley's high fiber content makes it a diabetes superfood -- and is one of the reasons it has less impact on blood sugar than other grains. One-half cup of cooked whole hulled barley (1/4 cup uncooked) provides 8 grams of fiber -- that's 30 percent of your daily requirement. Plus it's high in minerals such as manganese, selenium, and iron, and vitamins such as niacin and B-6.

Many variations of barley are available. They differ in nutritional value and preparation time.

Pearl barley, which is readily available in supermarkets, is a less nutritious option. The tough hull and part of the bran have been removed. Avoid fine pearl; it doesn't have bran or germ, and is least nutritious. Look for good quality brands like Bob's Red Mill.

Whole hulled barley (sometimes called hull-less) is your most nutritious choice. It has twice the fiber and more than twice the vitamins and minerals of pearl barley. It contains more insoluble fiber than whole wheat. Scotch and pot barley are processed, but still are high in fiber. However these types require longer cooking time.

Barley is an inexpensive pantry staple. And it couldn't be easier to prepare. You know how to boil water, don't you?

How to Cook Barley

The ratios are simple enough, even for those of us who are math challenged. One cup of pearl barley is cooked in 3 cups of boiling water for 40 to 50 minutes or until tender. To shorten the cooking time and for a fluffier grain, soak it in 2 cups of water for five hours or overnight. Then cook in boiling water for 15 minutes.

Whole hulled, pot barley, and scotch barley must be soaked overnight. To cook, add 1 cup of barley to 4 cups of water. Bring the water to a boil and cook for 60 minutes or until tender. An additional half-cup of water may be needed halfway through cooking.

If you plan to serve barley as a side dish in lieu of rice, you could cook it in vegetable or chicken stock for extra flavor. But salted water is just fine for most recipes, including the recipes that follow for soup, stuffing, salad, fried barley balls, and pilaf.

Soups

Beef barley soup and Scotch broth (a traditional stew, usually of lamb, root vegetables, and barley) are old standbys that feature barley. This is because barley stands up so well to rich, flavorful meats. But a handful of barley is a tasty and nutritious addition to any soup, whether it be a vegetable-filled minestrone, or a more delicate chicken soup. Barley's gelatinous quality imparts a subtle thickening to broth and the grains add body.

Stuffing

Barley also makes a great substitute for bread cubes in stuffing. Replace the exact amount of cubes with cooked barley (if you are stuffing the bird, cook it with water; if you plan to bake it in a dish, cook it with stock) in your favorite stuffing recipe. Start with sauteed onions, celery, carrots, herbs, and salt and pepper. Jazz up the stuffing with nuts or sausage.

Golden Barley Burgers (made with hulled barley)

This take on Italian rice balls, those crispy cheese-filled morsels, is so much better and better for you. Barley's sticky texture holds these treats together during frying, and produces a crunchy exterior and moist interior. And you can sneak in chopped vegetables like green beans or broccoli. Add raw minced onion, a beaten egg, salt, pepper, and green vegetables to cooked barley and form into balls around a nugget of your favorite cheese. For more browning surface, squash the balls into patties. You are guaranteed a deliciously crunchy, golden-brown patty best served with lycopene-rich tomato sauce.

Summer Salad with Pearl Barley

Pasta salad will fade from your memory after you've transformed barley into a summer salad perfect for the buffet table. Toss cooked barley with lemon or lime zest and lots of fresh herbs -- mint, chives, parsley, basil, and scallions. Dress with garlicky-lemon vinaigrette.*

Or use part of an orange -- zest, and bits of segments -- and some olives for a salty-sweet accent. For an extra special touch, decorate the salad with edible flowers from your yard like pansies, Johnny Jump-Ups, chive blossoms, borage, day lilies, or rose petals. (Make sure they haven't been sprayed with pesticides.)

* To make this vinaigrette: Mash a clove of garlic and a sprinkle of salt with a fork. Add one part lemon juice then 2 and 1/2 parts olive oil. Whisk with a fork adding salt, pepper, or lemon juice as desired.

Vegetable Barley Pilaf

Pilaf is a delicious way to transform leftovers into a satisfying one-pot dinner. Sauté onion, garlic, and chopped fresh or frozen vegetables. Add meat -- you can extend that last slice of steak, pork chop, or the remaining bits on a chicken carcass. Or keep it vegetarian by using meaty mushrooms and protein-rich crushed nuts. This is the ultimate use-what-you-have dish. Serve with a fresh green salad.

Portion Size is Key

Barley has the lowest glycemic index and glycemic load of all the grains tested to date; however, that doesn't make it a low carb food. You still have to count every last carbohydrate -- and test, test, test, after you eat. Portion control matters.

One-quarter cup of whole, hulled barley makes 3/4 cup cooked. That contains 34 grams of carbs, 8 grams of fiber, and 6 grams of protein. Pearl barley has the same amount of carbs, but less fiber and protein. So keep those portions to between 1/4 and 1/2 cup cooked and enjoy!

Elizabeth Keyser writes about food for Connecticut Magazine, Fairfield County Weekly, Hartford Advocate, CT Bites and other publications, Web sites and blogs. Her work has appeared in GQ, the New York Times, the New York Post and American Photo. She has won 11 awards from the Society of Professional Journalists Connecticut Chapter, the New England Newspaper Association, and the Connecticut Press Club.

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